



# Being Proactive Means Being Pro-future

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

**HELP WANTED:** Nonprofit organizations needed to fulfill tomorrow's aspirations. Organizations mired in present problems need not apply.

**T**he word on every nonprofit leader's lips these days is "proactive." This term signifies forward thinking and fast action. From a futurist's point of view, being proactive and being reactive are closely aligned with pro-future and anti-future behaviors.

But aren't all of us in the nonprofit sector working to build a better future? Of course we are. The critical difference is in the attitude with which we go about that work.

Far too many nonprofits seem to believe that the future will take care of itself if they can just take care of the problems in the present. These reactors are so caught up in meeting day-to-day challenges that they can only think about the future in the short term. By contrast, proactors focus on identifying emerging trends that will help them prefigure mission needs.

## Three Crucial Differences

To stimulate your thinking about what it takes to be proactive rather than reactive, here are three main differences between the two:

### Difference #1.

#### Organizational Mindset

- Reactors are problem-solution oriented. Proactors are creation-evolution oriented.
- Reactors' motto is "We've always done it this way." Proactors' motto is "Let's see if it still holds water."
- Reactors act when trends are in the mainstream and are major influences (too late in the game to have any significant impact). Proactors look at the fringes, the counter-cultures, and emerging trends to prefigure impacts, track trend vectors, and prepare for alternative futures.

- Reactors are upset by changes in their community. Proactors delight in creating new forms of what community means.

### Difference #2.

#### Attitude Toward Technology

- Reactors see technology as a threat to human interaction with their clients, members, stakeholders, and constituents. Proactors see technology as a creative way to increase the human interaction with those same precious people.
- Reactors use technology to limit the size of their work force and to save money. Proactors integrate technology, staff, and programs to build stronger organizations.

### Difference #3.

#### Program and Service Delivery

- Reactors jump on the bandwagon and copy what other nonprofits are doing. (Any of you start a mentoring program lately?) Proactors constantly seek innovative ways to accomplish their mission.
- Reactors are big on standardized operations that force staff to act in predictable ways. Proactors encourage—even insist—that their staff act in creative, out-of-the-box ways.
- Reactors get locked into set patterns of thinking about their mission, programs, and service population. Proactors aren't afraid to challenge their assumptions and to experiment.

## Present or Future Oriented—Which Are You?

Merely doing things isn't being proactive. Reactive nonprofits often defend themselves by listing all the programs and services they're doing. The feeling seems to be that doing something—anything—is being proactive. Yet, you can easily find major reactive components in those vaunted programs and services. The need for many of



## FIVE WAYS TO BECOME MORE PROACTIVE

To be proactive, you must break out of the reactor mindset. Here are five tips for you and everyone in your organization:

- 1 Before you copy** what another nonprofit in your mission arena is doing—stop! Ask yourself: Are you any less creative, intelligent, and resourceful than they? Isn't there an even better, cooler, slicker, more efficient way of doing things? Merely copying programs and services eventually leads to mission stasis—and that ain't a pretty sight in anyone's future. Let others copy you—if they must!
- 2 Establish regular and frequent staff and board meetings** earmarked solely to cast aside thinking about the present. Instead ask "What if...?" questions about your mission and programs.
- 3 Next to the in-basket on your desk**, place a trial-balloon basket. Fill it with those "out-there" ideas that can give your programs and services the leading edge in your mission arena. Take your trial-balloon basket to those "What if...?" meetings. Float those ideas up and outta that basket and into the emerging future-consciousness of your organization.
- 4 With every decision you make and action you take**, ask yourself: "How long have I known about this issue?" Establish a meaningful reward system for "proactivity" for yourself and for your staff. Give yourself demerits if you've been aware of the issue for some time and have only now acted. Give yourself even more demerits if the issue snuck up and blindsided you out of the blue. Your goal is to train and discipline yourself to prefigure conditions and issues facing your organization and your mission. Doing as much prefiguring as possible will let you place a lot of your organizational and personal decisions "out there" in the future.
- 5 Don't listen to Chicken Little.** The sky isn't falling. It's merely changing. The Industrial Age is pooping out. Hence, many of our social institutions that supported the old system are now archaic and must be supplanted. Being reactive to social and economic change is a waste of precious time and resources. Concentrate instead on helping create our new society and our new economy. Remember that people are much more resilient than we sometimes give them credit for. As massive waves of change rush toward us, our communities don't need you to stick your fingers in a dike to hold back the inevitable. Our communities need you to teach them to surf those waves.



those programs and services was probably apparent well before the organization resolved to take action.

Proactive organizations don't need or want to list all the things they're doing. They're too busy looking ahead. Proactors turn their attention away from the present and the past. They focus on creating—not merely repairing—our communities. They're optimistic about our communities and our people. That's being proactive. That's being pro-future! ■

#### Selected References

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations, 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).



Bruce Glasrud is an anthro-futurist and president of Third Sector Horizons (4837 Hanson Road, Shoreview, Minnesota 55126-5919, 651-482-0324, [futurer@aol.com](mailto:futurer@aol.com)), specializing in nonprofit organization futures.

#### Are You Busy—Or Are You Doing Something?

*"It is not enough to be busy; so are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?"*

— Henry David Thoreau